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A study of the G.I. Bill's genesis and reception reveals the narrow interests it was originally intended to serve. Designed as a reward to servicemen and as a device to lessen the economic effects of demobilization, the Bill made a great impact upon American higher education. (1) It provided equality of opportunity unparalleled in the nation's history. (2) Veterans demonstrated that far more of American youth could benefit from education than had previously done so. (3) Veterans helped to alter the balance between public and private enrollments. (4) Popular attention, unprecedented enrollments and the obvious success of the Bill forced a re-examination of the objectives, facilities and methods of the higher education system. (5) The married student became an accepted part of academic life. (6) Increased federal aid was made possible, especially for construction, scholarships and 2 more G.I. Bills. Neither the sponsor of the Bill nor the popular media anticipated its significance. The number of G.I.s who attended college under the Bill far exceeded expectations and some educators feared the influx would lower educational standards. This proved to be another of many erroneous assumptions. The G.I. Bill was underestimated in its broadest conception and in its operational detail. (JS)

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ABSTRACT

A study of the genesis, reception, and operation of the G.I. Bill indicates that it was underestimated in its broadest conception and in its operational detail.

Designed as a reward to servicemen and as a device to lessen the economic effects of demobilization, the Bill's impact on higher education probably equalled its contribution to demobilization.

The provision of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 that dealt with higher education not only accomplished the objectives of its sponsors but also produced results, general and particular, that were unexpected.

The Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, reflected its sponsors self interest, their memory of the depression of the 1930's, and their memory of the veterans of World War I. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who with the American Legion played the major role in passage of the G.I. Bill, first concerned himself with post-war education in July 1942, when his uncle, Frederic A. Delano, chairman of the National Resources Planning Board, urged him to undertake a "full-fledged" study of post-war problems. Roosevelt declined on the grounds that it would include "the danger of diverting people's attention from the winning of the war." Instead, Roosevelt told his uncle there was "no harm in a wholly unpublicized, 'off the record' preliminary examination of the subject....."[1] Four months later, however, Roosevelt made his first public statement about the post-war education of veterans. On November 13, 1942, the day he signed into law the Selective Service bill lowering the draft age to eighteen, Roosevelt announced that a presidential "committee of educators, under the auspices of the War and Navy Departments," would study the program needed to enable "the young men whose education has been interrupted to resume their schooling and afford equal opportunity for the training and education of other

young men of ability after their service in the armed forces has come to an end."[2] Considering the opposition to drafting teenagers, Roosevelt made a wise political move by expressing concern about the education of the boys he was about to draft, "The danger of diverting people's attention," to the contrary.

The National Resources Planning Board presented to Roosevelt the recommendations of its off-the record study on June 30, 1943, while the public Armed Forces Committee on Postwar Educational Opportunities for Service Personnel, also known as the Osborn Committee in honor of its chairman Major General Frederick H. Osborn, submitted its Preliminary Report to the President exactly one month later.[3] In a fireside chat on July 28, 1943, Roosevelt spoke to the American people about the progress of the war and also called for a comprehensive program of benefits for veterans. Three months later he transmitted the Osborn Report to Congress and urged legislation incorporating its ideas. When he signed the G.I. Bill into law the next June Roosevelt commented that it "substantially carries out most of the recommendations made by me in a speech on July 28, 1943 and more specifically in messages to the Congress dated October 27, 1943 and November 23, 1943."[4]

Roosevelt wanted a G.I. Bill for at least four reasons. First, he felt the country was "determined to show its gratitude to its returning veterans by providing educational and vocational opportunities."[5] Second, Roosevelt, in his acceptance of the 1944 Democratic nomination and elsewhere, demonstrated that he realized aid to veterans was good politics.[6] A presidential aide, for example, once warned Roosevelt's personal friend and adviser, Harry Hopkins, "that unless something is done soon on the

legislation for the education of returning soldiers, the opposition may steal the thunder."[7] Third, the President wanted to restock the nation's supply of college-educated citizens which the war had depleted. And fourth, Roosevelt viewed the G.I. Bill as a partial cure for postwar economic problems. At one point Roosevelt even considered "something like the C.C.C. program" to help solve the expected "post-war employment problem."[8] Roosevelt's view of educational aid to veterans was limited: it satisfied the moral obligation he felt toward service personnel; it was good politics; and it would reduce unemployment. The initiative to assist all veterans to earn their degrees, even those with the minimum ability to do college work, did not come from the chief executive. Under the recommendations he submitted to Congress only "a limited number of ex-service men and women selected for their special aptitudes" would be allowed to receive a second, third, and fourth year of college.[9] Roosevelt never conceived of the G.I. Bill as anything but a practical political response to the major problem of what to do with veterans.

The American Legion, whose contribution to the G.I. Bill was equally substantial, campaigned and lobbied long and hard for a more generous bill than the Osborn Committee and Roosevelt suggested. Their reasons for doing so, however, were more limited.

At their convention in September 1942, the Legion adopted a resolution urging Congress to enact legislation for the education and training of veterans. A year later, impatient at the lack of Congressional action, the convention established a committee to write a bill. On January 11, 1944, Bennett Champ Clark, Democratic Senator from Missouri and the first National Commander of the Legion, along with nine co-sponsors, introduced the Legion

bill in the Senate. The Legion bill competed with the bill introduced a month earlier by Senator Elbert D. Thomas, Democrat of Utah, which incorporated the Osborn suggestions. Roosevelt signed a bill in June 1944 that contained features of both bills but which included most of the more generous features demanded by the Legion.

The Legion has never been bashful in claiming its share of the credit for the G.I. Bill.[10] In his three-part article, written in 1949 and published in The American Legion Magazine with the blessing of the National Commander, David Camelon drew this conclusion about the G.I. Bill: "The Legion conceived it, the Legion drafted it, and fought for it."[11]

Their was only one reason behind the Legion's activity on behalf of veteran education. David Camelon wrote that "The idea behind the G.I. Bill was as simple as that: to give the men who were fighting the opportunity they deserved -- to restore them, as nearly as possible, to the position they might have had if they had not been called to serve America...." [12] National Commander Perry Brown, in 1949, credited the "Legionnaires of World War I" with the legislative victory because they "leaped into the breach, writing and fighting out of their own bitter experience."[13] The Legion's interest in the G.I. Bill, therefore, was always that of a pressure group out to reward its members and its potential members.[14]

Veteran groups other than the Legion also viewed the G.I. Bill as merely a reward to servicemen. On February 16, 1944, representatives from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Regular Veterans Association, and the Disabled American Veterans sent an open letter to Senator Clark, chairman of the Senate's Veterans' Sub Committee, and sent copies to every member of Congress, in which they criticized the proposed G.I. Bill's Title on Educational Aid because it

might "jeopardize the entire structure of veteran benefits and provoke another Economy Act." These veteran groups, with a combined membership of over half a million, were afraid that if Congress were too generous with all veterans, it might restrict the benefits paid to "those who have suffered physical and/or mental handicap by reason of military or naval service."[15] This had happened during the depression and many veterans wanted to avoid its repeat.

The tendency to view the G.I. Bill as a device to prevent the recurrence of unpleasant parts of the past was not limited to Roosevelt or the American Legion. In its report on the bill that Roosevelt eventually signed, the Senate Finance Committee stated that the purpose of the measure was "to provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans." The report also reminded its readers that "At the conclusion of the last war all of the nations involved save only the United States and to a lesser extent Great Britain failed dismally in this task of reintegration of the civilian population, and thereby planted the seeds of the present war....If we should fail in that task, disaster and chaos are inevitable."[16] During the summer of 1943 Dr. Harry Noble Wright, president of the City College of New York, voiced the common sentiment that the danger of throwing millions of veterans back into civilian life could be greatly reduced by providing them with the opportunity of going to college -- an off-the-street and onto-the-campus program.[17] The fear of unemployment, but especially unemployed veterans, was standard fare during the war years.[18]

The uncertainties of reconversion from war to peace, made more pronounced by memories of the depression that preceded the war, and the twin feelings of gratitude and fear people exhibited toward the veterans, motivated the passage of the G.I. Bill.

Historians unanimously agree that the G.I. Bill accomplished what it was designed to do, but historians also emphatically agree that the Bill did much more. Some interpret the Bill as a "revolutionary way" by which the economically and socially unblessed lifted their sights and climbed the American status ladder.[19]

In the realm of higher education the Bill's impact probably has been as important to the country as was its contribution to demobilization. First, the Bill provided higher education with an equality of opportunity and democracy unparalleled in the nation's history. Today, tens of thousands of sons and daughters of veterans who were first generation college graduates are now enrolled on campuses throughout the country. Second, the veterans who were first generation students demonstrated that far more of the nation's youth could profit from education than previously had done so. Third, the veterans, and only partly because of their numbers, helped alter the balance between public and private enrollments. Before World War II, the majority of students enrolled at private institutions; today only one third do. Fourth, the popular attention showered upon the veteran, the unprecedented enrollments, and the obvious success of the G.I. Bill forced the nation to re-examine the objectives, facilities, and methods of its higher education system. The best example, of course, is President Truman's "President's Commission on Higher Education," appointed in July 1946. Fifth, veterans made the married student an accepted part of academic life, acquainted the country with record enrollments which later became common-place, and forced more flexibility into higher education. And sixth, the success of the G.I. Bill helped to make possible additional federal aid to higher education, especially for construction, for scholarships, and for two more G.I. Bills.

No one would insist that all the changes in higher education during the past twenty-four years stem from the G.I. Bill. Certainly the heritage of the depression, the scientific and technological explosion, America's inter-nationalism, and economic prosperity all have helped to alter the system. The sponsors of the G.I. Bill, however, never intended for it to play a role in this large drama, in fact the thought apparently never occurred to them.

The persons who concerned themselves during 1944 and 1945 with veterans in general and with the operation of the G.I. Bill in particular, underestimated the legislation's potential. Such newspapers as the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Des Moines Register, Chicago Tribune, and the New York Times did not feel the new Act deserved an editorial to celebrate its birth. Nor did the popular magazines focus attention on the new legislation. In December 1945 Congress liberalized the G.I. Bill, removing the 25 year old age limit for eligibility and increasing the subsistence allowances from $50 to $65 per month for single veterans, and from $75 to $90 per month for veterans with dependents. But again, the vast majority of newspapers and popular magazines ignored the amended Act in its editorials. If the nation's popular commentators analized the Act as an important piece of domestic legislation, it was not apparent to their audience.

The authors of books about veterans and their post-war readjustment varied in their awareness of the G.I. Bill and its potential value. Charles G. Bolte, chairman of the American Veterans Committee and a combat veteran, concluded about the Act in 1945 that "Most veterans preferred jobs to school -- which will continue to be the case, meaning that the best provision of the bill will never be useful to the great majority of veterans."[20] Professor Dixon Wector,

on the other hand, felt that because of the G.I. Bill "no deserving veteran need start his post-war career from scratch, under conditions of insecurity as he faced in the old days."[21] At best, authors concerning themselves with veterans devoted a short chapter to education in all its phrases. At worse, authors such as journalist Morton Thompson, a veteran, wrote about the veteran only to entertain readers, with no discussion of educational or economic adjustment, but entire chapters on "How To Talk Civilian" and "How To Get In Bed With Your Wife."[22]

The attempt of government officials and educators to estimate the number of veterans who would attend college proved of little value. In the spring of 1944, the Army conducted a survey and concluded that eight per cent of its personnel would return to school (high school, college, and all other) if government aid were available. Four months later a new Army survey lowered the figure to seven per cent and a follow-up study in October held to the same statistic.[23] In December 1944 Roosevelt put the number at a vague "hundreds of thousands." Frank T. Hines, administrator of the Veterans Administration, meanwhile, felt that a survey of post-war intentions was a waste of time.[24]

Educators were no more perceptive. Most merely repeated the military surveys. Earl J. McGrath, a Dean at the University of Buffalo, a veteran, and a future United States Commissioner of Education, however, concluded that 640,000 veterans would become full-time students after the war, but that "in no academic year will more than 150,000 veterans be full-time students."[25] William Mather Lewis, president of Lafayette College also took issue with the army's seven per cent estimate. Speaking before the annual dinner of the National Institute of Social Sciences, in May 1945, Lewis insisted that "the number of men who will avail themselves of

educational offerings...is being overestimated."[25] Probably the most widely read article about veteran enrollment during 1944-45 was by Stanley Frank, neither educator nor government official. The title of his August 1945 article, in The Saturday Evening Post, "G.I.'s Reject Education," was self-revealing and indicative of how unreliable were all such estimates.[27]

The number of veterans who attended college under the G.I. Bill exceeded all expectations. By June 30, 1955, 2.2 millions of veterans, 14.3% of all World War II veterans, had studied under the law, in addition to 3.5 million who studied at schools below the college level. During the peak enrollment of the autumn of 1947, close to 1,150,000 veterans crowded onto the nation's campus.[28]

While almost all educators favored a G.I. Bill for the best students, the thought of providing economic assistance to all veterans who were capable of doing college-level work frightened an important minority. Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, predicted that colleges and universities would open their doors to unqualified veterans because the institutions could not resist the money, insisted that "education is not a device for coping with mass unemployment," and labeled the G.I. Bill a "threat to American education."[29] James B. Conant, president of Harvard, favored a Bill which would finance "the future education of a carefully selected number of returned veterans for three or four years."[30] When Roosevelt signed the bill that called for the education of all veterans with ability, Conant expressed a lack of faith in colleges and universities to keep out unqualified students.[31] After observing the G.I. Bill in operation, Harvard economist Seymour Harris concluded

that the fears of Hutchins and Conant were well-founded. He concluded that "the B.I. Bill carried the principle of democratization too far." There were too many college graduates for the economy, according to Harris, who implied that colleges and universities conferred degrees on students who were not worthy.[32] Fortunately, Hutchins, Conant, and Harris were a minority.

The majority of educators, on the other hand, looked upon the veteran not as a threat but as a challenge: a challenge because while everyone realized veterans would be different from the regular college student, no one know exactly how different. Predictions about the veteran as a student often were contradictory, but from the considerable material written some generalizations are possible. It was predicted that the veteran as a college student would be mature, hard working, impatient with authority, and in need of more counseling than the non-veteran.[33] He would find it difficult to settle down to college work and if he had a wife, it would be a handicap. "Marriage," one professor wrote, "is a reason for thinking twice or perhaps thrice before entering college.... If there is a baby, college is almost out of the question for any reasonable man."[34] Most observers agreed that the veteran would be interested primarily in vocational studies. In one American Council on Education Bulletin Francis J. Brown, for example, concluded that "No exhortation will turn their interest to liberal fields."[35]

As a student, the veteran was serious, mature, and hard working. Beyond that, the early predictions of what he would be like proved misleading. Almost all studies have concluded that the veteran earned higher grades than did his non-veteran classmate.[36] Thirty per cent of all veterans were married and ten per cent had children when they started their education,

yet these veterans usually earned higher grades than single veterans. A study of the class of 1949 by Fortune magazine concluded that contrary to the expectation that veterans would be impatient with authority, "just the opposite" was true.[37] President Conant of Harvard admitted that the veterans were "the most mature and promising students Harvard has ever had." In May 1951 President E. B. Fred of The University of Wisconsin reported that "Our 30,000 student veterans have been a stabilizing influence on Wisconsin student life."[39] A study, by a President's Commission, of major fields of study chosen by veterans proved that the distribution was comparable to that which characterized the education of non-veterans.[40]

An examination of the G.I. Bill in terms of what it was designed to do, and what it did, as well as a survey of what veterans were expected to be like as students, and what they were really like, reveals a wide gap between expectations and realizations. The G.I. Bill was underestimated in its broadest conception and in its operational detail. It points out once again that the impact of a war often turns up in unexpected places.

1 Franklin D. Roosevelt to Frederic A. Delano, July 6, 1942, Roosevelt Papers, Official File 1092, Box 10.

2 Samuel Rosenman (ed.), The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (13 vols., New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938-50), XI, p. 470

3 For the NRPB report see Roosevelt Papers, OF 1092, Box 10; for the Osborn report see Ibid., OF 5182.

4 Copy of Roosevelt's statement in Samuel Rosenman Papers, Box 9.

5 Roosevelt to Frederick H. Osborn, December 22, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 5182; Public Papers, XII, pp. 419-454.

6 Public Papers, XIII, pp. 201-206; Rosenman to Roosevelt, September 23, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 5182.

7 Oscar Cox to Harry Hopkins, July 2, 1943, Rosenman Papers, Box 3.

8 Roosevelt to James F. Byrnes, August 4, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 4351, Box 5.

9 Public Papers, XII, p. 451.

10 For example see Charles G. Bolte, The New Veteran (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945), p. 124; John Stelle, "Still Our No. 1 Job." The American Legion Magazine 40 (August 1946), p. 2.

11 David Camelon, "I Saw The G.I. Bill Written," The American Legion Magazine 47 (September 1949), p. 47; for recognition of, and praise for, the Legion's contribution, see General Frank T. Hines, administrator of The Veterans Administration, speech before the 1944 National Convention of The American Legion, Vital Speeches 11 (November 1, 1944), p. 57.

12 Camelon, "I Saw The G.I. Bill Written," (September 1949), p. 47.

13 Perry Brown to "Fellow Legionnaires," The American Legion Magazine 47 (August 1, 1949), p. 10.

14 For Vice Presidential nominee Harry S. Truman's recognition of veterans as a pressure group see his speech before the 1944 encampment of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, New York Times (August 24, 1944), p. 13; on this same point see "Labor Doesn't Forget," American Federationist 53 (December 1946), pp. 8-9 ; see also position of Eleanor Roosevelt New York Times (April 6, 1942) p. 12.

15 Camelon, "A Surprise Attack," The American Legion Magazine 47 (October 1949), p. 19. The Veterans of Foreign Wars later reversed its position and supported the G.I. Bill.

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17 New York Times (July 29, 1943), p. 21; also see Floyd W. Reeves, "Demobilization and Readjustment," American Teacher 28 (October 1943) pp. 14-17; Bolte, The Veteran Comes Back, p. 151.

18 See, for example, E. Jay Howenstine, Jr., The Economics of Demobilization (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1944); New York Times (February 20, 1943), p. 7, (May 24, 1943) p. 13, (August 22, 1943), p. 39, and (February 4, 1944), p. 21.

19 See Eric Goldman, The Crucial Decade And After (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), pp. 12-13; Homer D. Babbidge, Jr. and Robert M. Rosenzweig, The Federal Interest in Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), p. 23.

20 Bolte, The New Veteran, pp. 123-124.

21 Dixon Wector, When Johnny Comes Marching Home (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1944), p. 525.

22 Morton Thompson, How To Be A Civilian (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1946); committee of the National Research Council, Psychology for the Returning Serviceman (New York: Penguin Books, 1945), contained 18 chapters, including "Choosing a Job," and "Learning New Skills," but nothing on the G.I. Bill.

23 New York Times (March 19, 1944) IV, p. 9; Colonel Thomas D. Campbell to Roosevelt, July 29, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 227; "Post-War Educational Plans of White Enlisted Men," Roosevelt Papers, OF 1571-A.

24 Roosevelt to Osborn, December 22, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 5182; Hines to Byrnes, December 28, 1944, Roosevelt Papers, OF 1571-A; Hines, in "Education and Rehabilitation of Returning Veterans With Special Reference to the Provisions of Public Law 16 and 346," Journal of Educational Sociology 18 (October 1944), p. 75, wrote that "If jobs are scarce and there is considerable unemployment, perhaps a million and a half will be in the educational program...."

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29 Robert M. Hutchins, "The Threat to American Education," Colliers 114 (December 30, 1944), pp. 20-21.

30 "Annual Report of the President of the University," Harvard Alumni Bulletin 46 (January 22, 1944), p. 244.

31 Ibid., 47 (February 3, 1945), pp. 285-286.

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33 For a representative example of comment see William Claflin, "Expectations of the Veterans," Educational Outlook 19 (November 1944), pp. 4-5; Walter R. Goetsch, "The G.I. in Civvies," School and Society 62 (July 21, 1945), pp. 45-46; Gaynor Pearson, "Veteran Versus the Professor," Ibid., (September 1, 1945), pp. 131-133; Edward C. McDonagh, "Some Hints to Professors," Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors 31 (December 1945), pp. 643-647; Walter Spearman and Jack R. Brown, "When the Veteran Goes to College," South Atlantic Quarterly 45 (January 1946), pp. 31-42.

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37 "The Class of '49," Fortune 39 (June 1949), p. 86.

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